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View Finder

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View Finder · *Raymond Carver*

A MAN WITHOUT HANDS came to the door to sell me a photograph of my house. Except for the chrome hooks, he was an ordinary-looking man of fifty or so.

"How did you lose your hands?" I asked, after he'd said what he wanted.

"That's another story," he said. "You want this picture of the house or not?"

"Come on in," I said. "I just made coffee."

I'd just made some jello too, but I didn't tell him that.

"I might use your toilet," the man with no hands said.

I wanted to see how he would hold a cup of coffee using those hooks. I knew how he used the camera. It was an old Polaroid camera, big and black. It fastened to leather straps that looped over his shoulders and around his back, securing the camera to his chest. He would stand on the sidewalk in front of a house, locate the house in the view finder, depress the lever with one of his hooks, and out popped the picture in a minute or so. I'd been watching from the window.

"Where'd you say the toilet was?"

"Down there, turn right."

By this time, bending and hunching, he'd let himself out of the straps. He put the camera on the sofa and straightened his jacket. "You can look at this while I'm gone."

I took the photograph from him. There was the little rectangle of lawn, the driveway, carport, front steps, bay window, kitchen window. Why would I want a photograph of this tragedy? I looked closer and saw the outline of my head, *my head*, behind the kitchen window and a few steps back from the sink. I looked at the photograph for a time, and then I heard the toilet flush. He came down the hall, zipped and smiling, one hook holding his belt, the other tucking his shirt in.

"What do you think?" he said. "All right? Personally, I think it turned out fine, but then I know what I'm doing and, let's face it, it's not that hard shooting a house. Unless the weather's inclement, but when the weather's inclement I don't work except inside. Special-assignment type work, you know." He plucked at his crotch.

"Here's coffee," I said.

"You're alone, right?" He looked at the living room. He shook his head.

"Hard, hard." He sat next to the camera, leaned back with a sigh, and closed his eyes.

"Drink your coffee," I said. I sat in the chair across from him. A week before, three kids in baseball caps had come to the house. One of them had said, "Can we paint your address on the curb, sir? Everybody on the street's

doing it. Just a dollar.” Two boys waited on the sidewalk, one of them with a can of white paint at his feet, the other holding a brush. All three boys had their sleeves rolled.

“Three kids were by here a while back wanting to paint my address on the curb. They wanted a dollar, too. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” It was a long shot. But I watched him just the same.

He leaned forward importantly, the cup balanced between his hooks. He carefully placed the cup on the little table. He looked at me. “That’s crazy, you know. I work alone. Always have, always will. What are you saying?”

“I was trying to make a connection,” I said. I had a headache. Coffee’s no good for it, but sometimes jello helps. I picked up the photograph. “I was in the kitchen,” I said.

“I know. I saw you from the street.”

“How often does that happen? Getting somebody in the picture along with the house? Usually I’m in the back.”

“Happens all the time,” he said. “It’s a sure sell. Sometimes they see me shooting the house and they come out and ask me to make sure I get them in the picture. Maybe the lady of the house, she wants me to snap hubby washing his car. Or else there’s junior working the lawnmower and she says, *get him, get him*, and I get him. Or the little family is gathered on the patio for a nice little lunch, and would I please.” His right leg began to jiggle. “So they just up and left you, right? Packed up and left. It hurts. Kids I don’t know about. Not any more. I don’t like kids. I don’t even like my own kids. I work alone, as I said. The picture?”

“I’ll take it,” I said. I stood up for the cups. “You don’t live around here. Where do you live?”

“Right now I have a room downtown. It’s okay. I take a bus out, you know, and after I’ve worked all the neighborhoods, I go somewhere else. There’s better ways to go, but I get by.”

“What about your kids?” I waited with the cups and watched him struggle up from the sofa.

“Screw them. Their mother too! They’re what gave me this.” He brought the hooks up in front of my face. He turned and started pulling into his straps. “I’d like to forgive and forget, you know, but I can’t. I still hurt. And that’s the trouble. I can’t forgive or forget.”

I looked again at the hooks as they maneuvered the straps. It was wonderful to see what he could do with those hooks.

“Thanks for the coffee and the use of the toilet. You’re going through the mill now. I sympathize.” He raised and lowered his hooks. “What can I do?”

“Take more pictures,” I said. “I want you to take pictures of me and the house both.”

“It won’t work,” he said. “She won’t come back.”

"I don't want her back," I said.

He snorted. He looked at me. "I can give you a rate," he said. "Three for a dollar? If I went any lower I'd hardly come out."

We went outside. He adjusted the shutter. He told me where to stand, and we got down to it. We moved around the house. Very systematic, we were. Sometimes I'd look sideways. Other times I'd look straight into the camera. Just getting outside helped.

"Good," he'd say. "That's good. That one turned out real nice. Let's see," he said after we'd circled the house and were back in the driveway again. "That's twenty. You want any more?"

"Two or three more," I said. "On the roof. I'll go up and you can shoot me from down here."

"Jesus," he said. He looked up and down the street. "Well, sure, go ahead—but be careful."

"You were right," I said. "They did just up and move out. The whole kit and kaboodle. You were right on target."

The man with no hands said: "You didn't need to say word one. I knew the instant you opened the door." He shook his hooks at me. "You feel like she cut the ground right out from under you! Took your legs in the process. Look at this! This is what they leave you with. Screw it," he said. "You want to get up on that roof, or not? I've got to go," the man said.

I brought a chair out and put it under the edge of the carport. I still couldn't reach. He stood in the driveway and watched me. I found a crate and put that on the chair. I climbed onto the chair and then the crate. I raised up onto the carport, walked to the roof, and made my way on hands and knees across the shingles to a little flat place near the chimney. I stood up and looked around. There was a breeze. I waved, and he waved back with both hooks. Then I saw the rocks. It was like a little rock nest there on the screen over the chimney hole. Kids must have lobbed them up trying to land them in the chimney.

I picked up one of the rocks. "Ready?" I called.

He had me located in his view finder.

"Okay," he answered.

I turned and threw back my arm. "Now!" I called. I hooked that rock as far as I could, south.

"I don't know," I heard him say. "You moved," he said. "We'll see in a minute," and in a minute he said: "By God, it's okay." He looked at it. He held it up. "You know," he said, "it's good."

"Once more," I called. I picked up another rock. I grinned. I felt I could lift off. Fly.

"Now!" I called.